

## Ephemeral Beauteous Grief at the Altars of a Phantom Caesar: Aphra Behn's African Imoinda

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**Abstract:** *Oroonoko* is a masterpiece of the portrayal of the faults and misunderstandings of honor. Aphra Behn presents her readers with an archetype male character who is deluded with the royalism thrust upon him. In an attempt to regain Caesarean glory, Oroonoko, the protagonist of the text, obliterates Imoinda's verve. We aim at deconstructing Oroonoko's valor in relation to Imoinda's submissiveness explicating a pantomime victim.

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### 1. Introduction:

Aphra Behn's fictitious literary work, *Oroonoko*, presents the modern readers with intensified feelings of betrayal, injustice, and inhumanity that dismember innocence in its purest form. While the reader at first glance might perceive a fallen hero, a great renewed Caesar, or even a royal slave/prince, at a closer deconstructive approach to the narrative, one cannot but notice that the true victim is Imoinda rather than Oroonoko. She falls prey to a prideful man, who has been assimilated to western cultures that he himself calls a "degenerate race, who have no one human virtue left to distinguish them from the vilest creatures" (Behn 62). Being a fallen hero, who could not stand up to the great expectations the context imposed upon him, Oroonoko, ends up sacrificing the only person he has ultimate control over, Imoinda, in a last desperate attempt at fulfilling royalism and heroism.

This Royal Slave "loses his contracted wife in Africa when she is claimed by his grandfather's veil. He loses his military rank and freedom when tricked on board the slave vessel. He forgoes his royal status once he chooses allegiance with his fellow slaves" (Richards 672). In return, Oroonoko betrays Imoinda's trust when he breaks his own immense promises to be the provider of protection and happiness to her. For she "began to show she was with child, and did nothing but sigh and weep for the captivity of her lord, herself and the infant yet unborn, and believed, if it were so hard to gain the liberty of two, it would be more difficult to get that for three" (Behn 61). Imoinda lived a dreadful life where "her griefs were so many;" she begs a tyrant king for mercy, which she is not granted, she endures the misfortunes of slavery, and at last she dies in the name of honor, but a very sad brutal death it is. All the while, her prince in shining armor forgives the king, acquires a great deal of promises from their captives,

and spends most days "treating with Trefry" to gain his wife's and his own liberty (Behn 48).

A significant narrative technique that Behn uses to show her audience that Imoinda was fixed by her society is that she keeps calling Imoinda with her birth name, while Oroonoko becomes Caesar. "Before Oroonoko is renamed "Caesar," there are only five references to his personal name. Otherwise, he is six times referred to as a "prince," or (sixty-one times) as Caesar" (Kroll 583). While Imoinda's "new name, Clemene [is] used only six times" after she is renamed (Kroll 583). This fixation symbolizes the biological determination that women are forced to comply to. A man can change and achieve whatever he wants but a woman will always be a woman.

### 2. Male Supremacy and Altars of Beauty

Oroonoko, being the focus of the narrative, and the protagonist of Behn's master piece, is romanticized beyond reality. "Throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, it is novelty that most strongly links the worlds of verifiable experience with the worlds of imagination; but novelty brings imagination, often destructively, into contact with the real" (Starr 502). Behn's novelty in romanticizing Oroonoko not only deceives Imoinda, but also transfers the readers to a virtual dimension where they fancy that great heroism and honor, as painted in Oroonoko's person, exist.

The unrealistic description of Oroonoko's persona adds to the destructive and calamitous results. Oroonoko has the "real greatness of soul" and "his nose rising and Roman, instead of African and flat. His mouth, the finest shape that could be seen; far from those great turned lips, which are so natural to the rest of the" African populations (Behn 15). His "face was not of that brown, rusty Black which most of the nation are, but a perfect ebony, or polished jet," and "he had nothing of barbarity in his nature, but in all points addressed himself, as if his education had

been in some European court" (Behn 15). In battle, Oroonoko, "performs deeds of superhuman valor" therefore, Behn's portrayal of Oroonoko is unreal to a point that it collides with the image of an ordinary fallen slave/hero (Pacheco 497).

While Imoinda's description, on the other hand, details fairly enough similar beautiful appearance; "the beautiful black Venus to our young Mars, as charming in her person as he, and of delicate virtues," the "fair Queen of Night," she is rather never attributed equal mental qualities like the ones incorporated into Oroonoko's descriptions (Behn 16). Although wits are included in Oroonoko's description, it is not even mentioned when Imoinda is the one being portrayed.

Not only is Oroonoko different than the other commoners described in this literary piece, but also, Imoinda is not an equal to Oroonoko. "The physical differences produce radical dissimilarity and inequality, which extend to the moral life" (Hughes 205). Men and women are born with singular destinies allocated upon them by the social class and the milieu they come to grow-up in. "For wives have a respect to their husbands equal to what any other people pay a deity, and when a man finds any occasion to quit his wife, if he love her, she dies by his hand, if not, he sells her" (Behn 71). Male supremacy is palpable all through the text; a man controls the fate of not only his wife but a countless number of "wives and concubines" (Behn 18).

Oroonoko's king is also a male figure manifesting the absolute tyrant, who uses power to relinquish his sexual thirst and psychological need to feel young and supreme. The tragedy lies in the fact that Imoinda gets tangled in a cold war of male ascendancy. Oroonoko faces "opposition to [his] marriage from his [own] uncle, who desires the would-be bride, Imoinda, for himself" (Gruber 100). "Behn focuses on the power struggle between Oroonoko and his grandfather the king as they fight for sexual control of Imoinda" (Athey 422). This male struggle only affects Imoinda in reality; objectifying her and degrading her to the status of an inanimate "treasure" (Behn 21). "Although Oroonoko 'ravishes' Imoinda before the king does and is therefore the victor in this contest, the king proves his ultimate control over Imoinda's body by selling her into slavery. Oroonoko, on the other hand, is duped into slavery" (Athey 422).

Imoinda is the living example of the truthfulness of the old saying "beauty is a double edged sword." She is admired by everyone, even "white men sigh after her" and make "a thousand vows at her feet" all men talk of nothing "but Imoinda, Imoinda" (Behn 17). When readers contemplate Imoinda's character they cannot but

wonder why she is portrayed as exceptionally submissive and spiritually broken. But one needs to remember that a woman of "Honor" was expected to be submissive and passive. The code of honor that entails and dictates actions is, of course, prescribed by the fittest dominant power. For example, the king's court is the place "where maidens never came, unless for the king's private use" and he only picks the "lady he has a mind to honor" (Behn 19).

### 3. Feminine Chastity and Masculine Honor

Our phantom Caesar lives up to a code of honor that not only controls his own life but also controls the lives of others around him. For Oroonoko, "honor, as an ethic of individual pride, is extremely vulnerable to insult or injury; any treatment not consonant with his dignity diminishes the man of honor" (Pacheco 497). Oroonoko's honor transfers into Imoinda's "horror" for "there is no easy distinction between honor and horror" (Athey 417). Imoinda's life is enclosed by obeying her husband to honor him, meaning, Imoinda as a female "is a very special instance of private property, possessing honor only in relation to the men in her life" (Pacheco 597).

Imoinda's and Oroonoko's "love-making begins only after Imoinda reassures him that the king "had robb'd him of no part of her Virgin-Honour" argues Joseph M. Ortiz in his article *Arms and the Woman: Narrative, Imperialism, and Virgilian Memoria in Aphra Behn's Oroonoko* (124). "In one sense, Oroonoko's success in challenging the king's authority hinges upon his literal "authority," [his] biological capability" because his pride requires him to get what he has set his mind on from the beginning (Ortiz 124). Oroonoko being the prince and hero in the story came up with a solution to their love dilemma and decided that Imoinda will be his "this night, tomorrow 'tis the king's" (Behn 306). Hence, what matters to this great Honorable hero is not that he frees his wife from the hands of a decaying covetous king, but that he is the one that gets to her virginity first, by which he maintains his own honor.

Oroonoko discourses of nothing more than honor; his actions, ideas, beliefs, and even countenance are all affected by his personal notion of what honor is:

"I swear by my honor, which to violate, would not only render me contemptible and despised by all brave and honest men, and so give myself perpetual pain, and it would be eternally offending and diseasing all mankind, harming, betraying, circumventing and outraging all men; but punishments hereafter are suffered by oneself, and the world takes no cognizance whether this god have revenged them or not, it is done so

secretly and deferred so long; while the man of no honor suffers every moment the scorn and contempt of the honest world, and dies everyday ignominiously in his fame, which is more valuable than life" (Behn 39).

Preceding an action "Oroonoko calls on his code of honor to distinguish acceptable violence from what is unacceptable" concluding, more often than not, that he has the right to lead, to kill, and to violate lives whenever his honor dictates it (Athey 432).

Out of fear of a ruined chastity and out of horror that "Imoinda becomes a polluted thing" Oroonoko decides to honor Imoinda by ending her own life. In favor of maintaining his honor Oroonoko "must violate Imoinda's body before others do so" (Athey 432). Imoinda's death can be explained in accord to "the Realm of the psyche, [for] if something evokes feelings that are totally disproportionate in intensity to those warranted under the circumstances, it is a pointer to the need to explore the source of extreme emotion" (Shukla 86). For that reason, Oroonoko's imbalance that is caused by his conflicting emotions being a royal slave desperately warranting liberty cause him to unload by killing his most precious possession.

#### 4. Deaths and Non-Deaths:

Death of honor plights Imoinda earliest in the narrative, followed by Oroonoko's un-honorable and un-royal death. "He told her his design first of killing her, and then his enemies, and next himself, and the impossibility of escaping and therefore he told her the necessity of dying" (Behn 332). She, of course, started "pleading for death" once she saw her husband determined and in owe. Oroonoko killed his wife to prove his bravery to himself and others, but failed as he did not even have the courage to kill himself. "Peoples are distinguished not by their bodies, but by what they do to them, manipulation, marking and mutilation of the bodies being recurrent concerns" (Hughes 214). Oroonoko becomes distinguished in the manner he takes control over his wife's body.

Imoinda kneeled for the king to forgive her and spare her life, kneeled for the king to spare Oroonoko's life, and eventually Kneeled "before the sacrificer, while he with a hand resolved, and a heart breaking within, gave her the fatal stroke" and her life ended with her Kneeling for a man whom she was willing to do anything for, while he preferred killing her aiming to achieve personal glory (Behn 332). "Two main factors contribute to violence against women, firstly, women's commodification and conceptions of honor" (Tripathi 65). She was "a young victim" of a male's ego (Behn 332). She is also a victim of society, one that has imbedded cultural traditions that encapsulate women in their husband's

demands or more accurately male's demands and ideas.

In an attempt to justify his monstrous action, Oroonoko explains; by saying, "No, gentlemen, you are deceived; you will find no more Caesars to be whipped; no more find a faith in me: feeble as you think me, I have strength yet left to secure me from a second Indignity" (Behn 333). Imoinda's death was intended to save him the humiliation of losing face after he avenges himself from his enemies and the intended plan was to follow that with a suicide. The Royal Slave, nonetheless, fails not only to kill himself but to kill his true enemies to prove his bravery and honorable royalty. Both the Old King and the White Enslavers survive and "Behn records no triumph of her victim immediately following his death. There is no 'spiritual rejoicing' [and] 'no hope of heavenly comfort'" (Richards 653).

#### 5. Conclusion

Aphra Behn ends her story with Imoinda's name emphasizing the importance of Imoinda's presence in her narrative, even though, this female character barely has a voice she has a great effect on the reading of the text. A couple of pages early in the text, Behn says that "wives pay an entire obedience to their husbands, obey, and stay for them where they were appointed" (Behn 327). In *Words of one's own: Some evidence against men's use of language as a tool of domination* Joyce Kessler argues that "feminist historians contend was formative in the development of the patriarchal definitions of modern womanhood" because it was a time when female writers and other male writers started targeting a different slice of audience, women (2). Imoinda is swindled by a phantom of an egoistic and selfish Caesar that causes her to lose her beauty, and shades her life with continuous grief.

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